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The Field Day Project and Cultural Identity in Northern Ireland

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SERIES OF OCCASIONAL PAPERS

**Ireland's Fifth Province:
The Field Day Project and Cultural Identity
in Northern Ireland**

Lissi Daber

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

Seamus Heaney: Chorus, from *The Cure at Troy*,
Faber and Faber, London, 1990, p. 77

This brief paper deals with Northern Ireland *today* - but I will need to start by a very brief historical detour.

Nationalism is a cultural thing, and national identity must ultimately be defined in cultural terms. In a Northern Irish context, nationalist and nationalism, however, denote Catholics and Catholicism. Indeed today, Sinn Féin - the political wing of the IRA - has appropriated the rather conservative concept of nationalist self-determination. The Catholic Irish use of the term *nationalist* goes back to the mid- and late 19th Century fight for home rule, and of course entailed anti-British, and, ultimately anti-Protestant, particularly in Ulster after the Ulster Unionists got greedy at the time of partition in 1920 and carved as large a slice as possible out of Ireland for themselves, and were allowed to do so by the British.

In the ensuing Orange State a majority community ruled: the law was theirs, the police was theirs, the Stormont Parliament and political institutions were theirs, the

minority could be entirely ignored. And where a century and a half earlier, Ulster Protestants had been among the loudest campaigners against British rule, and seen themselves as Ulster Irish liberal nationalists, they now disassociated themselves from everything Irish and nationalist, and stressed their British and Protestant identity. Some Ulster Unionist still today like to remind the British that they signed the Union in blood by their sacrifice of thousands of Ulster Division soldiers at the battle of the Somme in 1916 in the British cause.

So a polarized sectarian society emerged in the north. The uncertainties of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland forced the Protestants to stay firmly and exclusively united, especially in view of Irish Free State claims and threats, questioning the legitimacy of the Northern Irish state.

To a great extent the system was to blame: relying on a political system that could easily be manipulated into something very like apartheid, rather than on civil rights, was fatal. Northern Ireland has recently been called the graveyard of Britain's unwritten constitution.¹

Two organizations provided cultural and political identities for the two groups: The Orange Order and the Catholic Church - both institutions very conservative in outlook.

By the 1960s - after the introduction of the welfare state in Northern Ireland - the Catholic population had to some degree accepted the existence of the state and began to campaign for equal democratic and social rights with the protestant population. By then there was a fair amount of cultural accommodation as is evident from Rosemary Harris' comprehensive 1972 study *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbours and Strangers in a Border Community*, in which she describes 'how people from both sides of the sectarian divide made the necessary accommodations with each other to avoid conflict, disagreement, or even just giving offence. Patterns of behaviour emerged and were followed to enable neighbours to live as neighbours for some purposes, and as strangers for other purposes'.²

But the more conservative Unionists resisted this opening up - springing from, among other things, the Civil Rights Campaign. By the Unionist Presbyterians, especially, this was felt to be a threat to the very existence of the state, and a letting in of Papist values and of anti-Christ, a much favoured concept with Ian Paisley and followers. And politics took to the streets with a re-polarization of the community and a revival of the terrorist tradition on both sides, in what is usually referred to as *The Troubles*.

Although the Unionists are very divided today, and most disassociate themselves from Ian Paisley and his methods, his following is actually quite small, one often hears grudging admiration from Ulster Protestants that he is after all the genuine article, standing for Ulster protestantism, or presbyterianism, rather, as it was at the time of

settlement, and that somehow it is they who have apostatized and become secularized. I think it is this attitude, however anachronistic he may sound, that allows Paisley, in times of intense conflict and polarization, to loom very large on the Northern Irish scene. The old polarization based on confrontation and confessionality has resulted in the fact that Northern Ireland was, indeed is, often referred to as 'a place apart', unique in its ancient hatreds and historical myths, as an unresolvable backward-looking fated place fighting yesterday's battle, in what the poet Seamus Deane called 'the language of exhausted fatalism', which could be seen as one of the principal obstacles to a dynamic debate in Northern Ireland.

I want to argue that a new discourse is being heard in Northern Ireland now, and that a different debate about identity and cultural as well as political future is beginning.

Historians sometimes refer to Northern Ireland as a failure in nation-building, it is not British, and not Irish, but both. But the term *failure* is rendered meaningless if we concentrate on and accept what *is* - namely the dualism, rather than on what ought to be, or what could have been. And this is a central aspect of much of the internal cultural debate in Northern Ireland today, a move away from the utopian dream of oneness and unity towards a pluralistic fusion. A different angle is taken, or a different and more realistic mapping of cultural identity. Eamonn Hughes claims that Northern Ireland is not so much 'enclosed by its borders as defined by them: it is border country', and 'a place in which identity does not confront difference, rather identity is difference', and 'must always be formed on terms of intimacy with what one chooses to regard as the other'.³

This acknowledgement of the always at least dual nature of the Northern Irish and their culture is made possible by the recognition that borders *can* be crossed, and that difference or borders need not be viewed as only negative, and cultural diversity need not imply political confrontation. Indeed much recent Irish poetry, fiction, and drama is concerned with the crossing of cultural and political borders. Even if culture (in the narrow sense of the word) cannot unify a nation, in the words of George Boyce, it can reveal that nations are not unified things.⁴

This new perspective is interestingly paralleled by developments in the Irish Republic, where, especially since Mary Robinson's presidency, a sort of redefinition of Irish culture is taking place, from the very exclusively Gaelic Irish nationalism of the first sixty years of the Republic's existence - totally rejecting any British influence or heritage - to an acknowledgement today that the culture of Ireland *is* Anglo-Irish - that the British influence cannot, indeed should not, be denied.

So in view of the concern in Northern Ireland with a plural, if uncertain, but dynamic identity, Northern Ireland cannot be meaningfully seen as an anachronistic place apart in Europe. Northern Ireland is perhaps rather typical of the modern condition, of Europe

west and not least east.

I do not want to go into the international dimension of Europeanism, or the Anglo-Irish Agreement, in relation to Northern Ireland. But let me just mention that the EC may contribute (in addition to money) in easing political tension, partly by defusing nationalism and fostering a sense of common cause and common future, a convergence of interests, as it were, and partly by making Northern Irish politicians of both sides work together as an integrated group, which is already a reality in the recently established Northern Irish centre in Brussels. This also means that Northern Ireland does not have to operate through Britain as a region only. Certainly by 1992 figures, Northern Ireland is the most positive region as regards EC membership of all the United Kingdom.

The 1983 Haagerup-report termed Northern Ireland *a constitutional oddity*. But this is really an Anglo-Irish problem, rather than a Northern Irish problem, which has finally been recognized by Britain and Ireland. It was argued recently that a bill of rights for Northern Ireland should be carried through now as a confidence boosting measure. Something along the line of the 1991 Hong Kong bill of human and political rights.⁵

No political party in Northern Ireland would certainly object to this. And there is also cross-sectarian support for a European role in Northern Ireland, something seen by both sides as a getting away from British intransigence, lack of interest, or let-down.⁶

There can be little doubt that both groups in Northern Ireland today agree that the terrorist violence is the greatest barrier to peace and to a mutually confident co-existence, and there is even agreement on the nature of the problem today: that it is structural and constitutional, rather than cultural and historical. It is on the subject of solutions that the going gets rough. Many people refuse to get involved in the process in a recognition of the sensitivity of political discussion, and out of fear of being taken to account by the one side or the other. As Seamus Heaney wrote, 'Whatever you say, say nothing'.⁷

At the same time, the interplay between political structure and identity is all-pervasive. But where political discussion is fraught with dangers, sometimes felt to be futile, and politicians perhaps even out of step with the people of Northern Ireland, other fora take interesting initiatives and carry the debate along.

Central among these is the Field Day Project, founded in Derry in 1980, who has 'developed an every-more ambitious programme of cultural intervention in the politics of particularly Northern Ireland'. 'At the heart of the Field Day programme lies the concept of Ireland's fifth province' - 'the secret centre - the place where all oppositions were resolved. It is a no-man's land, a neutral ground, where all things can detach themselves from all partisan and prejudiced connections'.⁸

The essence of the image is the idea of unity, of a pan-Irish shared dimension. In the words of Tom Paulin, poet and Field Day director, 'The fifth province offers an invisible

challenge to the nationalist image of the four green fields'.⁹

Cultural diversity and first and foremost a new perspective are important ideas behind Field Day's work. But the group also feeds into an old-established Irish tradition of cultural/literary dialogue when socio/political discourse is impossible or difficult.

In Tom Paulin's poem *And where do you stand on the national question?*, which ironizes over academics, journalists and researchers descending in droves on Northern Ireland to interview people, he rejects the traditional solutions, and counters with a short fiction called *Molyneaux's last hope*:

'These islands are stepping stones
to a metropolitan home,
an archipelago that's strung
between America and Europe'.
'So you're a band of Orange dandies?
Oscar in Pere-Lachaise with a sash on?'
'well, not exactly ... that's unfair -
like my saying it's a green mess you're after'.
'I want a form that's classic and secular,
the risen *Republique*,
a new song for a new constitution -
wouldn't you rather have that
than stay loose, baggy and British?
You don't *have* to fall back
on Burke and the Cruiser,
on a batty style
and slack o'whoozy emotion'.
We hit a pause like a ramp,
shrug and mark time
before we guess the design
of life after Prior:
the last civil servant
is dropping over from Whitehall.
Call him Sir Peregrine Falkland;
he's a bit thick - not a high-flyer -
but he'll do the trick.¹⁰

The Field Day company does not have a manifesto as such. But in one of the first in the series of pamphlets published on Irish cultural history and identity is stated that '(all the

directors) believed that Field Day could and should contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes, which had become both a symptom and cause of the current situation'.¹¹ Field Day's emphasis on pluralism is crucial. As Seamus Deane says, 'It is no good just performing our plays and selling pamphlets to people we know. There is no point in continuing unless we can get through to Unionists'.¹²

The company was founded by some of Ireland's best known writers and dramatists, many of them from the North, and in addition to commissioning and producing plays, pamphlets and translations, and organizing readings, the company's most ambitious project has been the publication two years ago of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing 500 AD - 1980* in three large tomes. Seamus Deane, the anthology's editor states that the company sees the collection as an important act of definition that will show how the various groups, sects and races, which have intermingled in Ireland, have produced a literature that is unique to them and an achievement which makes manifest what they have in common.¹³

Tom Paulin stressed the need for the pluralistic view in the anthology, and claimed that 'the intention was not to really privilege one tradition over the other; not to present an ideology, but ideologies, and say to the reader "make what you want of them"'.¹⁴

Despite criticism that some of Field Day's productions appear to stress unity over pluralism and side with green nationalism, (which could be an instance of the 'which side are you on'-pressure, as this criticism appears unjust if the totality of the work is judged), the Company enjoys great respect, not least for the high literary quality of its work, and has been called 'a platform for the life of the mind, of whatever persuasion, at a time when mindlessness threatens to engulf us all'.¹⁵

The Field Day Company pamphlets - of which some twenty have been published - deserve special mention. They are widely read and used in teaching in schools and universities, and specifically tackle Irish culture, mythologies and stereotypes. For example in Marianne Elliott's 1985 *Watchmen in Sion: The Protestant Idea of Liberty*, Elliott takes issue with the view that the Protestants were inevitably insular and defensive, and writes,

'The libertarian thinking behind much of Irish Protestant thinking can, and has, produced dramatic inter-communal alliances and radical solutions in the past, and a better understanding of those attitudes might help the quite appreciable merits of that libertarian tradition to rise again in an atmosphere which accepts that the Protestants also need to be conciliated'.¹⁶

But it is in the theatrical activities that the Company reaches its widest audience. The Field Day normally commissions its plays, leaving the subject and treatment very much to the playwright. And writers can also submit work to Field Day for publication or production. I want to mention a few examples:

Terry Eagleton's play *Saint Oscar* from 1989 deals with the fear of difference, of otherness, centered around Edward Carson's prosecution of Oscar Wilde - the Edward Carson who later became the leader of Ulster Unionism. And David Rudkin's 1983 *The Saxon Shore* addresses the Protestant predicament, seen from the standpoint of settlers, or rather of 'descendants of those who have come in the wake of conquest and who are later exposed to the onslaughts of the dispossessed natives'.¹⁷

On the long term effect of the Company's work, Brian Friel, the dramatist, answered, 'I think it should lead to a cultural state, not a political state. And I think that out of that cultural state, the possibility of a political state follows'.¹⁸

Field Day's contribution to the cultural debate in Northern Ireland today is clearly significant in its more realistic cultural 'mapping', because it provides insights into the various cultural selfhoods of Northern Ireland, and in this way may be important contributors towards an understanding of the other side and to the whole issue of identity and community in the North.

Let me finally mention a very different, but in its way quite parallel project. The Opsahl Commission and the oral hearings of the so-called *Initiative 92* which took place throughout Northern Ireland during January and February of 1993. The purpose was to elicit and canvass the opinions of the ordinary citizens of Northern Ireland in a public debate about its future and possible ways forward. The hearings were chaired by the late Norwegian professor of international law Torkel Opsahl, and organized by an independent group of 220 people from a wide cross-section of Northern Irish backgrounds. Taped and written submissions were made from people in sensitive areas. Professor Opsahl stressed that it was the process of consultation and dialogue which was more important than the particular outcome. That it is important to look forward now, rather than keep looking into old grievances. When the hearings were over, the Commission published a report with suggestions and recommendations. This report was out in the early summer of 1993, and an opinion poll was run to test the public's reactions to the Commission's recommendations.

This poll showed that 'A remarkably consistent pattern was for northern Catholics and southerners to offer massive - indeed, almost identical - support for all the recommendations, with somewhat less (though still strong) enthusiasm in Britain and northern Protestants much more wary'. (Robin Wilson's analysis of poll in *FORTNIGHT* September 1993).¹⁹

So to conclude, if Brian Friel's statement that a cultural state may lead to a political state is perhaps a little facile or optimistic, as Northern Ireland badly needs a new structure that can be seen as legitimate by all the people of the North, to give a sense of common future and direction and first and foremost of equal political and social rights - this new structure must, on the other hand, spring from cultural attitudes and accommodations in order to create confidence in the community as a whole. It is not enough that the political elite may agree among themselves.

It is therefore interesting that at the moment the more promising initiatives are taken by non-politicians, and that the dialogue takes place mainly in community groups and in the cultural sphere at large. It should, however, be remembered that Field Day's work and contacts are predominantly middle-class. Whether any trickle-down effects from their work will be felt in the much more ghettoized Catholic and Protestant working-class areas of Belfast and Derry still remains to be seen.

Notes

- 1 Dr. Kevin Boyle, talk on *The Irish Question and human rights in a European perspective*, at NUI conference on *The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in a European Context*, Oslo, 11.2.1993.
- 2 George Boyce: *Northern Ireland: a place apart?* in Eamonn Hughes (ed.): *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland 1960-1990*, Open University Press, 1991, p. 16.
- 3 Eamonn Hughes (ed.) op.cit. pp. 3-4.
- 4 in Eamonn Hughes (ed.) op.cit. p. 22.
- 5 by the late Professor Torkel Opsahl, Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, Oslo, and chairman of *INITIATIVE 92* investigating committee in Northern Ireland.
- 6 Eurobarometer Survey, autumn, 1992.
- 7 Seamus Heaney: *NORTH*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, p. 57.
- 8 Shaun Richards: *Field Day's fifth province: avenue or impasse?* in Eamonn Hughes (ed.) op.cit. p. 139.
- 9 Quoted in Shaun Richards, in Eamonn Hughes (ed.) op.cit. p. 140.
- 10 Tom Paulin: *Liberty Tree*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, pp. 68-69.
- 11 Preface to Ireland's Field Day (1985), quoted in Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 140.

- 12 Quoted in Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 142.
- 13 Field Day publicity brochure, quoted in Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 146.
- 14 Quoted in Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 146.
- 15 By Thomas Kilroy, qouted in Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 148.
- 16 Marianne Elliott, *Watchmen in Sion: The Protestant idea of Liberty*, Field Day, Derry, 1985, p. 27.
- 17 Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 143.
- 18 Brian Friel interview, quoted in Shaun Richards op.cit. p. 141.
- 19 Robin Wilson's analysis of opinion poll published in *FORTNIGHT*, Belfast, September 1993.

European Studies

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1. Ulf Hedetoft: *Euronationalism - or how the EC affects the nation-state as a repository of identity*, 1990 (30 p.).
2. *European Research Programme - Annual Report 1989/90*, 1991 (34 p.).
3. Ernst-Ullrich Pinkert: *Die 'Jungfer Europa' und der 'Genius der Freiheit' in Skandinavien*, 1991 (13 p.).
4. Carola Opitz-Wiemers: *Das kontrollierte Bewußtsein. Zu Ingeborg Bachmanns Romanzyklus "Todesarten"*, 1991 (15 p.).
5. Ernst-Ullrich Pinkert (red.): *Politisk tegnsætning. Nationale symboler og national identitet i Europa og i Den tredje Verden*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 1991 (165 p.).
6. Ernst-Ullrich Pinkert (red.): *Drømmen om Amerika i Europa*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 1993 (144 p.).
7. Ulf Hedetoft (red.): *Nation or Integration? Perspectives on Europe in the 90s*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 1993 (143 p.).
8. Occasional Paper: Otto Preuß: *Difficulties and possibilities of Christian-inspired politics in the Eastern part of Germany before and after 1989. A personal summary*, 1994 (11 p.).
9. Occasional Paper: Werner Biechele: *Stepchildren of German Literature? Political causes and cultural consequences of the way to handle German-language Literatures of South-East Europe in Germany*, 1994 (13 p.).
10. Occasional Paper: Wolfgang Zank: *Nation, Customs Union, Political Union - Collective Identity, Economy, and Politics in Germany 1771-1871 in a non-Structuralist Perspective*, 1994 (27 p.).
11. Occasional Paper: Staffan Zetterholm: *Politics and Cultural Discrimination. The dynamics of culture-based politics*, 1994 (15 p.).